

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON  
Department of History  
Semester I, 1992-93

History 572

Mr. Donnelly

Traditional Popular Religion in Europe before 1900

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This seminar will address itself to the religious beliefs and practices of ordinary men and women in various European countries during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The teachings and rituals of the "official" churches will not be neglected, but in the first instance the religious ideas and ceremonies of the common folk in countryside and town will be the main focus of our attention. Among the aspects of folk religion that will concern us are magical healing, astrology, prophecy, witchcraft, and such allied beliefs as those in ghosts and fairies. We will also consider such celebrations as village feasts and Carnival as well as pilgrimages to shrines and other holy places.

Our first goal in making this study of European folk religion will be to understand why beliefs and practices that we would regard as "superstitious" and bizarre or even revolting were seen as perfectly sensible and reasonable by people in those earlier centuries. In other words, we will aim at coming to know why their religious beliefs and practices had for them the truth of coherence. A second goal will be to identify and assess the forces - cultural, political, and economic - that undermined and eventually destroyed the integrity of the traditional religious forms. And a third goal will be to determine how and why the official churches asserted or reasserted their control over the ways in which the laity expressed their religious faith.

LECTURES

Meetings once a week, each meeting to last two hours; all meetings to be devoted to discussion of the required readings.

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS AND EXAMINATIONS

A research proposal of about fifteen pages focusing on a question or a set of related questions needing scholarly investigation, and stating the methods and sources to be used in the search for answers.

GRADING SYSTEM

1. Research proposal (50 percent)
2. Informed participation in seminar discussions (50 percent)

REQUIRED READING

Ellen Badone, ed., Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society (Princeton University Press, 1990).

Peter Burke, Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe (Harper Torchbooks, 1978).

Carlo Ginzberg, The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller (Penguin Books, 1982).

Carlo Ginzburg, The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Penguin Books, 1985; originally published 1966)

I.M. Lewis, Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession (2nd ed., Routledge, 1989)

Keith Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971).